

# Timor-Leste: Challenges to the Consolidation of Democracy



Australian  
National  
University

RUI GRAÇA FEIJÓ

IN BRIEF 2014/5

On 1 January 2013, Timor-Leste initiated a march on its own feet. The last UN special mission, which started back in 1999, and the International Stabilisation Force convened in the wake of the 2006 crisis, departed then, heralding a new phase in its political life. The fact that in 2012 Timor-Leste organised presidential and legislative elections considered free and fair and to comply with international standards, reinforced the country's legitimacy to be fully politically autonomous.

Both the majority of authors writing on Timor-Leste and international organisations who publish indices of democratic performance concur that Timor-Leste has achieved the status of a democratic polity, although the apparent stability of the regime cannot be equated with full democratic consolidation. Among the myriad challenges that this nation faces, democratic consolidation ranks high. I will consider three aspects.

## Generational Turnover

The presidential elections offered a glimpse into generational turnover. The incumbent president — a leading member of the 'Generation of 1975' (those who came of age in the last phase of the Portuguese colonialism, which includes Xanana Gusmão, Mari Alkatiri, and Mário Carrascalão) — was barred from the second round by two candidates who were teenagers at that point. This highlights the onset of a process of generational turnover. Recent declarations by Gusmão that he will step down sometime in 2014 further stresses the importance of this process.

Timor-Leste is a complex and paradoxical case. The typical case of generational turnover associated with transitions from authoritarianism considers that when the generation who negotiated the political change gives way to a new one, the latter emerges fully socialised in

democratic politics and formatted to operate within the system — not to challenge or discuss its merits once again. In Timor-Leste, a critical element in the rooting of democracy was the espousal of democratic principles by a strong charismatic leader. Charismatic and legal-rational legitimacy merged to produce a democratic polity. When the charismatic leader steps aside, what will become of his legacy?

In parallel with those who espouse the current system, worrying signs are discernible in Díli. First, several 'siren songs' can be heard — ones along the path of 'Asian values', others putting specific emphasis on 'Timorese values' — supposed to diverge from the standard democratic ethos.

Second, the role of the military in political life is open to question. So far, their will to intervene in the political arena has been confined within the limits of the constitutional order, as the election of Brigadier General Taur Matan Ruak as president shows. But some signs suggest that among the military there are aspirants to a more prominent role. Will this be circumscribed by the constitutional provisions? Or will they lay claims to a new role that has marred some developing democracies?

## Prosperity and Democracy

Timor-Leste is endowed with natural resources that have enabled the very rapid growth of its Petroleum Fund. However, the rise of nominal GDP per capita is not a panacea, and the relationships between prosperity and democracy are far from universally positive. Timor-Leste faces the challenge of managing its wealth in line with democratic precepts.

Two chapters of this program are the fight against poverty and the construction of a welfare state, and the development of an economic civil society. Both processes will impact the regime's capacity to strengthen its own basis and solidify democracy.

In order to implement the program, two polar conceptions may be adopted. Timor-Leste may choose clearly defined rules, institutionally framed, and validated through the rule of law. This would promote equity and equal opportunities, and the state would be regarded as a moral figure. Conversely, a choice could be made to rely on ad hoc policies — with individual negotiation between the state and private agents privileging personal ties over institutional norms. Such an approach would create confusion as to the role of the state, generate dependency on social and economic actors *vis à vis* those in power, and foster clienteles more than satisfy social needs. Corruption is the inevitable conclusion of this path.

Now Timor-Leste seems to be at the crossroads. In a greatly unfavourable regional and historical context, corruption is stagnant. If the Anti-Corruption Commission is operating and the judicial system passes condemnations, the frequency of cases brought before the public would be unacceptably high. The casuistic dependency of society in relation to those who happen to be in power, rather than the deployment of sound rules, is venom for a healthy civil society in which democracy can thrive.

### A Decentralised State

The constitution stipulates that the state will be institutionalised at distinct levels. These layers of public administration are called to perform complementary roles, and to assure that democratic governance is organised at all levels that are pertinent to the citizens, from their own immediate local community to the distant national government. In Timor-Leste, state bodies are envisaged at the level of the local *sukus* (comprising the smaller units called *aldeias*), as well as in the present day districts (*municípios*).

The creation of local organs of state administration has been subject to different

approaches since the UN's arrival in 1999. So far, there are rules to organise regular elections and determine the composition of those bodies. However, both the actual competences and the resources made available to the community leadership are missing.

The development of municipal organs of power has been under consideration since Alkatiri's government, but this important branch of state administration remains in the realm of a political project that has been postponed.

Both these processes are required to make democracy palpable to local communities and grassroots citizens. Their implementation, following more than a decade of experiments and intense study of the conditions for their development, is a critical factor in the consolidation of democracy as a responsive regime to popular participation.

### Conclusion

Challenges to democratic consolidation in Timor-Leste come both from the ongoing process of state-building (decentralisation) that requires commitment of the ruling elite to a major reform, and from the adequate choice of policies in a context where democratic norms suffer the competition of alternative narratives that may subvert the main tenets of the constitutional ethos.

### Author Notes

*Rui Graça Feijó (D.Phil Oxon, 1984) is assistant researcher at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal. He was the author of Timor-Leste: Paisagem Tropical com Gente Dentro (2006), as well as several articles in international journals and book chapters focusing on Timorese identity construction, democratic performance, and electoral behaviour. His current research interests focus on grassroots democracy and decentralisation. His edited volume on Timorese semi-presidentialism is due for publication in 2014.*

